

Afghanistan Security Issues Final Research Paper
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Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have been working in Afghanistan since 2003 on counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. These teams are jointly organized with military and civilians from various services and departments, which creates a challenging dynamic because their main purpose is dealing directly with the civilian Afghan population. At the overarching strategic level in Afghanistan, President Obama has established the goal of beginning the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011. This creates milestones and goals for progress along the way.¹ For the PRTs, tactical-level negotiating with local leadership is part of daily operations. To maximize their negotiating capabilities, U.S. military negotiators must understand the potential limitations in cross-cultural activities. Most notably, they need to be aware of mission goals and endstates that are based on a Western perspective of time that need to be adjusted to meet the needs of the Afghan population.

While COIN operations should, in theory, be led by civilian authorities, the Department of Defense's recent COIN directive makes it clear that the role of the military is going to include working "closely with relevant U.S. Departments and Agencies, foreign governments and security forces, global and regional international organizations..."² As a result, cross-cultural training is a major part of professional military education as well as pre-deployment preparation. According to Dr. Dean during a lecture on COIN, "the hallmark of an irregular warrior is being skilled at coalition diplomacy."³ Mission success requires U.S. military forces' to interact with local communities: engagement with the local populace has become crucial.⁴ As a result of this direction and the lessons being learned in current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. troops can better understand their roles and the context of their operational situations.

The differences between American culture and the tribal culture of Afghanistan create contextual challenges. One area that highlights these challenges is negotiation. A negotiation is

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cross-cultural when the parties to it belong to different cultures and do not share the same ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.⁵ U.S. military officers have been trained in a traditionally low-context environment and face unfamiliar situations in the high-context culture where they're now conducting operations. The potential for frustration or even anger is derived from the "intercultural dissonance" caused by the mismatch of cultures and the lack of understanding or appreciation of the differences.⁶ In his focus on soldiers operating in Iraq, another high-context non-Western culture, Wunderle describes the "culture shock" that soldiers experienced as "the anxiety and physical and emotional discomfort that can occur when a person moves to an unfamiliar environment."⁷ Recognizing the potential for this difference in perception ahead of time can reduce the resulting frustration.

Current military cultural training generally focuses on appreciating, understanding, and respecting the cultural norms of all the parties at the negotiating table. These norms can be used as tools for shaping operations and expected effects.⁸ The first step is for U.S. soldiers and airmen to "understand and appreciate their own beliefs, behaviors, values, and norms...and how their perspectives might affect other cultures' views."⁹ However, negotiators shouldn't try to mimic their counterparts' culture but respect it.¹⁰ It may actually be more advantageous, instead, to anticipate a potential conflict of cultural norms so it can be diminished or complemented as part of the negotiation process leading to a satisfactory result for both sides.¹¹ In his study of U.S. soldiers negotiating in Iraq, Tressler suggests that this fundamental understanding of the differences between U.S. and local civilian counterparts provides a tool to help manage behavior and prevent the variable factors from presenting obstacles during negotiations.¹² With regard to the special nature of PRTs in Afghanistan, the different local environments in distinct provinces and variation in team composition as well as their approaches to military affairs, insurgency, and

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their tolerance of risk drive their operational strategies, including military-civilian negotiations.¹³ Hence, it's critical to be aware of cultural differences, and how they're perceived in order to succeed.

The greatest challenge based on a cultural differences faced by U.S. negotiators is the perception of time, or the use of timetables. According to Cohen, because they come from a high-context environment, American negotiators tend to rely on agendas, timelines, and time-specific goals and are thrown off by less meticulous negotiating partners.¹⁴ U.S. negotiators are goal-oriented and focus on short-term success. On the other hand, Afghan cultural norms remain high-context and focus on building relationships which requires a longer-term view. There is also a long history of conflict with Afghan tribal cultures that rests on a social tradition more than an actual written perspective.¹⁵ Hence, there is a need, according to Wunderle, to "find and strike a balance between realizing short-term gains and cultivating long-term relationships that might facilitate future interaction."¹⁶ This balance is required both at the tactical level in the daily operations of the PRTs working on construction projects within their villages as well as in the more overarching operational or strategic levels in which senior officers are planning security transition goals.

For a troop assigned to duty on a PRT for a year or less, the limited amount of time available to achieve tactical goals contributes to the failure of overall strategic goals of the U.S. in Afghanistan. According to Cohen, "time is crucial in diplomacy."¹⁷ Creating relationships, building trust, and enhancing credibility all take time that U.S. forces don't generally have available based on assignment rotation policies. The high-context Afghani culture doesn't rely on "arbitrary divisions of the clock face" so there have to be cross-cultural considerations of things such as planning for the future, punctuality, appointments and the overall perception of

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time.¹⁸ At the tactical level, this involves face-to-face meetings of PRT members with local civilians trying to make progress with reconstruction projects and enhancing the security of the population. The goal of SSTR operations is to provide an environment in which the local population can function for themselves. As a result, a relatively quick and simple construction project from the perspective of U.S. planners and engineers will be subject to the timeline of the local civilian population. This difference in the perspective of time may be frustrating, but it's important that U.S. negotiators recognize and appreciate cultural differences as diversity rather than labeling them as inappropriate responses in the tactical and operational environment.¹⁹ The definition of quick success for the PRTs may need to be redefined more in terms of relationship-building and Afghan successes, rather than the accomplishment of a specific construction goal.

The strategic goals of the U.S. tie directly into this measurement of success. By creating timelines for U.S. projects and operations, negotiations at the tactical level tend to reflect the premise that U.S. troops may not see projects through to the end and that they will fail to focus focus on building relationships. Cohen notes, within the Afghan culture, "personal encounters are not ruled by mechanical schedules; no conceivable activity could be more pressing or important than human contact. Steadiness, not haste, is the cardinal virtue."²⁰ For instance, a PRT negotiator may focus solely on completing a local construction project during his short deployment and get it done in accordance with U.S. timelines. In order to achieve this goal, he may work around Afghan labor issues by allowing U.S. troops to provide more man-hours on the project while letting the relationship with local provincial leaders flounder. On the surface, the project has been completed and it appears to be an operational success in the eyes of U.S. goals for progress. However, within other COIN realms, the negotiator has failed to provide an opportunity to let the Afghans take their country back and increase the credibility of U.S. forces

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in achieving that strategic goal. Cohen argues, “For cultures preoccupied with relationship, ‘payoffs’ cannot be detached from the relationship they derive from and must ultimately serve...Between individuals, companies, or nations, communal cultures believe, the benefits of a long-term, healthy relationship must always outweigh short-run considerations.”²¹ In a 2007 study of PRTs, Gauster summarizes the impact of the time factor by saying that it “plays into the hands of the government’s militant enemies, putting enormous pressure on the international crisis management effort to be successful however international politics often doesn’t pay enough attention to the fact that state building requires thinking in terms of generations.”²²

Perceptions of U.S. contributions to the Afghan state vary. Gauster writes, in 2007, that the Afghan population has shown a considerably lower acceptance of the U.S. than of European troops and that many Afghans who had suffered under the Taliban seemed to be skeptical of all international troops.²³ Much of the legitimacy of the PRT comes from their power to provide funding and resources to the local population. But, by keeping the resources tied to timelines, their impact is limited. For instance, funding through community development councils (CDCs) appear to work well in providing aid at the village, or tactical, level, but Afghans understand that the funding depends on yearly appropriations of foreign donors which aren’t sustainable over the long-term, so they don’t institutionalize the process.²⁴ This illustrates how the short-term focus of the U.S. military misses the point of the long-term, relationship-based efforts required for Afghan success.

The goals of the U.S. military in Afghanistan are based on Western expectations of timelines and achievement. These goals make sense to U.S. troops because they’re used to working with appointments and projects within their normal rotation schedules, but the perception on the Afghan side is different, which directly affects negotiations going on at all

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levels. Timelines also represent the strategic goals created by the U.S. The dilemma arises considering the cross-cultural differences in how U.S. and Afghans perceive the passage of time and the achievement of goals along a timeline. Understanding that this difference in perceptions exists is important to decision-making and working at the lowest levels of PRTs or throughout combatant command leadership.

¹ Haass.

² DOD 3000.05, 1.

³ Dean.

⁴ McFarland, 62.

⁵ Wunderle, *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness*, 34

⁶ Cohen, 25.

⁷ Wunderle, "How to Negotiate in the Middle East", 58

⁸ McFarland, 62.

⁹ Ibid, 62.

¹⁰ Wunderle, *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness*, 37

¹¹ Tressler, 19.

¹² Ibid, 23.

¹³ Gauster, 25.

¹⁴ Cohen, 35.

¹⁵ McFarland, 68-69.

¹⁶ Wunderle, "How to Negotiate in the Middle East", 64

¹⁷ Cohen, 33.

¹⁸ Ibid, 34.

¹⁹ McFarland, 64.

²⁰ Cohen, 34.

²¹ Ibid, 38.

²² Gauster, 48.

²³ Ibid, 29.

²⁴ Rubin, 355.

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